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An Untrodden Path and A Safe Guide.

This Address was delivered in Stanley Street Church, on the evening of the first Sabbath of this year. At the close of the service, a member of the Session asked to be allowed to have it printed for circulation in the congregation. His request was granted, and the pastor trusts these pages may be helpful to some who did not hear his spoken words.

Montreal,
January, 1891.

"Ye have not passed this way heretofore."
Josh. iii. 4.

The people of Israel were within sight of the promised land. Hundreds of years before it was given to Abraham as an inheritance for his posterity. After long waiting and a painful course of preparation, his descendants were at last ready to go in and possess Canaan. They had come to the banks of the Jordan; its waters were to be separated by the hand of God, so that they might pass over dry shod. It was a time of excitement and anxious expectation. Joshua was about to have bestowed upon him, an honour which was denied of God to his servant Moses. He was most anxious that their entry into the promised land should be successful. Careful preparations were made; cautious warnings were given. The Ark of the Covenant was to be reverently borne by the priests in advance and the people were to follow after at a distance of two thousand cubits. They were told to keep the Ark clearly in view, that

they might know the way by which they must go, "for," said he, "ye have not passed this way heretofore."

There are times in life when our circumstances are much like those of Israel on this occasion. We stand upon the threshold of an uncertain future; we are about to move forward not knowing whither our foosteps may lead us, and we hear a manifold voice saying to us, "ye have not passed this way heretofore." Such a time is the beginning of a new year. We then commence another stage of our earthly pilgrimage; we then look into the future with more than ordinary anxiety and hopefulness. Such is our condition on this, the first Sabbath of another year. We have started upon an untrodden path; we have entered upon an unknown future, for we "have not passed this way heretofore." What the way is through which we will be led, we know not: what this year has in store for us is wisely hidden from our eyes. We can make it very much what we please; its joys and sorrows, its successes and failures will depend to a great extent upon our own conduct. If we determine to make this

year better than any that have gone before, we can do it. How? That momentous journey upon which Israel was about to enter, would be entirely successful if they kept the Ark of the Covenant in view. By following its leading they would walk safely although they had not passed that way before. That Ark contained the tables of stone, on which were written the ten commandments, God's revealed will to men. It was a symbol of Christ. Christ was God manifest in the flesh, the most perfect revealation God has made of his will to men. He is our guide in life; by keeping him in view and following His leading, we will walk safely and make this year a successful one. He will inspire us with lofty views and noble purposes, he will give us the true idea of life and will give us strength to follow his leading, and make this year better than all that have gone before. The influence of his leading will be felt in many ways.

I. In our personal character. When we look at the last page of our life's history, we notice many imperfections in it. There are dark blots which mar its beauty terribly; there are many crooked and ugly lines in it. There is

much there that should not be, and a great deal wanting which we expected to find. As compared with other pages of the same book, there is not much improvement. We are not yet perfect, and perhaps it is better we are not. There is joy in growth, and the prospect of still growing fills us with delight. We should look forward with buoyant expectation to the possibilities of progress during this year.

1. Intellectually. Christ increased in wisdom, and everyone who follows his leading will grow intellectually. How? By thinking. Our minds may be more or less active, but their activity does not always result in intellectual growth and strength. The reason is, our thinking is not of the right kind. We should train ourselves to think on difficult subjects; we should accustom ourselves to deep, close, persistent thought, for only thus will our minds grow. Observation is also a great aid to intellectual growth. Very many live in this beautiful world, and pass through it and yet see and learn very little. How much they lose! Our Lord gives us a different example. He was a close observer of nature and the habits of men. Birds, flowers, the growing

harvest, the vine and its branches, the occupation of the husbandman, the housewife, the fisherman and the builder were all made subjects of careful study by him. Those marvellous books of nature and human life were ever before him, and he observed them so closely that he not only became acquainted with them, but drew from them such simple and beautiful illustrations as make him to stand alone among the great teachers of mankind. "Never man spake like this man." Let us learn from our Master to go through the world with our eyes open, ever learning from the many subjects of interest which lie in our path. The society of intelligent people is also an excellent means of mental growth. Very much precious time is wasted in idle conversation and in society, which is of no profit. Time is too precious to be thus trifled away. As Christ sought out the doctors, and was found in their company, hearing them and asking them questions, so we should seek the society of those whose conversation will be of profit to us, so that we may not only be informed, but stimulated to greater earnestness in the pursuit of knowledge. Good

books are also a great aid in intellectual growth. From them we can get the best thoughts of the best minds of the ages. Our books should be chosen with great care. Read nothing but the pure, the true, the good, the helpful. There are bad books as well as bad men. The man who reads a book of low moral tone, or of infidel teachings, is guilty of a greater folly than the man who breathes the heavy loathsome atmosphere of the pest house. Look upon the man who recommends such a book to you as a dangerous enemy, and refuse to associate with him. Cultivate the habit of careful, thoughtful reading. Select a few good books, and strive to master their contents. By so doing, you will constantly be tasting the joys of mental growth. Were we to get even one new, fresh thought each day, were we to learn one new fact each day, what a growth that would imply in three hundred and sixty-five days! Can we not do so?

2. In our moral character. We may have made some progress here, but there yet remains much to do. We have not perfect moral characters. We may have overcome one besetting sin, but another has sprung up in

its place. Luther compared sin to the beard on his face. He might have a clean shave one morning, but when he rose on the morrow, he found another crop growing. Sin dies hard, and the victories of last year will not warrant indifference during the present. There may still be the right eye to pluck out, or the right hand to cut off and cast from us. Many evil habits may be clinging to us which must be overcome. But we must not be satisfied with pulling up weeds; we must also develop and strengthen our good qualities. We grow in moral qualities by practice. We become truthful by jealously acting and speaking the truth. We are established in principles of honesty by always acting honestly. We become more courageous by doing brave things. We overcome selfishness and grow in liberality by crucifying self and doing kind acts. It is practice which makes perfect in moral character, and so long as life lasts there should be progress in this department.

3. In spiritual life. Those who follow the leading of Jesus of Nazareth learn to give spiritual things the supreme place in their lives. He said, Seek ye first the kingdom of

God and his righteousness. In his own life he placed the Father's will above everything else. We must learn to do the same. Our great concern this year should be the life, health and growth of our spiritual nature.

There are the unsaved amongst us. They have ofen resolved to attend to their salvation but have not done so. They are to-day where there were a year ago, or rather, are farther from the kingdom of God. Oh, unsaved ones, will you not now give up your opposition and surrender yourselves to Christ? Why should you prefer the bondage of sin to the glorious liberty of the children of God? Why should you choose the darkness of unbelief to the clear full light of fellowship with God? Why should you prefer the husks of sinful pleasure to the rich banquet of spiritual joys which awaits you in your father's house? "The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Will you not accept even now this gift and from this moment possess life-eternal? This year will be a miserable failure unless it finds you in the Kingdom of God.

Those who are already believers in Christ feel that their spiritual life is not what it should be. How very far short do we come of what God requires of us! How much lower is our life than the standard of our possibilities! How much we lose by following Jesus afar off! As we look at the life of Jesus, so holy, so gentle, so loving, and self-sacrificing, we are at once humbled and filled with an ardent desire to live as he did. We long to make this year better in spiritual things than any that have gone before. How can we do so? By feeding upon God's word. The truth of God is the food upon which the soul lives and grows. Our Lord was himself a most diligent student of Scripture, and to those who follow him he says, "Search the Scriptures." If we become more diligent, systematic students of the Bible, if we store our minds with its precious teachings, and delight to be obedient thereto, this year will be one of great progress in spiritual things.

Prayer is also an important element in this growth. It brings us into contact with God and draws from heaven those gifts of the Holy Ghost without which we cannot prosper in

spiritual things. Our Lord was a man of prayer. Never was known one who prayed so earnestly and persistently as he. He gave whole nights to prayer. All who are led of him must pray, and if this year finds us more regular and earnest in communion with God, it will be one of greater prosperity to us. Practice also gives strength to our spiritual fibre. We must be doers of the word and not hearers only, if we are to become strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. It is not enough to have the truth in our minds; it must get into our hearts and be wrought into our lives. We grow in faith by using the faith we already possess. We get more patience by being patient. We become more self-denying by performing acts of self-denial. Our sympathies are enlarged by the exercise of compassion. Our love grows deep and strong by loving even our enemies. Through obedience to God we grow like Him.

By thus keeping Christ in view and following his leading at all times, we will walk safely and make this year better than the past in our personal characters.

II. In our work. Our Lord was a worker. His first recorded words are, "Wist ye not that I must be about my father's business?" And among the last are, "I have finished the work thou gavest me to do." We can serve God in our work; we can glorify him by doing it well. Some are only preparing for life's work. The apprentice at his trade, the young man learning business, the student at school or college,—these are passing through a very important period of life. Our Lord had the same experience. Until he appeared on the banks of the Jordan, at the age of thirty, to be baptized by John, his life was one of preparation. The lesson taught by those years is, Prepare very carefully for life's work. Our Lord was in no hurry to come out from the obscurity of Nazareth and undertake the greatest work ever performed on earth. Young friend, be guided by him in this most important period of life. Let your time of preparation be one of diligent, painstaking labour. Be thorough. Master your subjects. Learn to do your work well. Resolve that this year will mark great improvement in this work, and when you come forth, may it be as a

workman who will not need to be ashamed.

Those who are actively engaged in life's work are conscious of many imperfections in the past. Our work was poorly done; there is much room for improvement. Our Lord not only prepared with great care for life's work, but also did it well. With our eyes fixed upon him we will never be satisfied with anything inferior. There is no disgrace in work; it is a disgrace to do it badly. Let us resolve that, by the help of God, we will do our work better this year than ever before—that it will be a sacred thing, doue as unto the Lord.

III. In our congregational life. We have made some progress in the past. As compared with other congregations, the year that has just closed has been fairly successful. But we are not satisfied. Our success is by no means what it should be, by no means what God wishes it to be. There is a land of promise lying before us. Are we willing to enter in and possess it? "There are great difficulties," some say. Yes, there are; but would you have success without difficulties? Victory is shorn of all its glory, if it be not

won in the face of mighty obstacles. Our difficulties are here to try us, to show us what stuff we are made of, and to make us grander, nobler men and women. There is intellect, and heart, and money enough in this congregation to make it a grand success, if we are only willing to do so. We might, if we choose, see this church filled with thoughtful, devoted worshippers; we might have a very large and prosperous Bible Class and Sabbath School; we might be doing a great work for the poor, and suffering, and unsaved in our own city; we might have one or more agents in heathen lands making known the good news of salvation to those who never heard of Christ. There are marvellous powers for good lying dormant in this congregation. Will we not try to bring them forth, and have them used for God's glory during this year? Our Lord lived and laboured and suffered and died for the good of mankind. If our eyes are fixed upon him as our leader, we will have something of the same zeal for the good of humanity, the establishment of God's Kingdom among men. How can we aid in our congregational work?

1. By having faith in God. Let us believe that this is the Lord's work, that he has given it to us to do, and that we can do it. If we have faith as a grain of mustard seed, we will be able to overcome all our difficulties —yea, even remove mountains. Let us enter upon this year with more confidence in God and larger hopes than we have ever had before.

2. By taking a deeper personal interest in the life of our congregation. We should regard ourselves as a part of this congregation —that its interests are ours, its failures our disgrace, its prosperity our honour. The life of each member is wrapped up in the bundle of the life of this church. Let us ever be conscious of this.

3. By doing our share of the work to the best of our ability. There is work for every one to do. Let each find his work and do it with earnestness and love, and we will have a living, growing, fruitful congregation. Then we will see the latent forces brought forth, and we will marvel at the power for good which was dormant among us.

Beloved, time is short. Life is rapidly hastening to its close. We may have entered

upon our last year. Let us bestir ourselves and do with our might whatever our hand findeth to do. "And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us; and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it."